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# Two rich men the U.S. would put in jail

WASHINGTON — The peculiarities of the Nixon administration are such that, during the same period of time it was bugging everyone in the telephone book, it was also trying to put two of the richest men in America in jail for wiretapping.

In fact, it is still trying to convict H. L. Hunt's sons, Bunker and Herbert, who are accused of hiring private detectives to listen in on some of the Hunts' executives' phone conversations.

The Hunts maintain their innocence, altho the detectives concerned in this bizarre affair involving tens of millions of dollars have either pleaded guilty or been convicted. Two have gone to jail; three, including a phone company employee, have received suspended sentences; while the Hunts have had their case thrown out on the grounds that the evidence against them was improperly collected. But the government is appealing, so these two brothers, each reputed to be a billionaire, may still be brought to the prisoner's dock.

The story of this madness begins in 1969, when H. L.'s nephew, Tom Hunt, who also is a senior executive of the Hunt Oil Company, noticed that H. L. H. Foods—no relation to Hunt Foods—was losing money, lots of it. This food company, it should be explained, grows, processes, and packages foods which it sells to other companies, who then retail it under the labels you see in the advertisements and the stores.

THE SUMS involved here are almost past imagining, but as of now it is estimated that Hunt Oil put about \$45 million into H. L. H. Foods that cannot be accounted for. The Hunts, their lawyers, accountants, and private detectives believe some or all of it was embezzled by about three key people in their own organization. However, no one has ever admitted the crime or been formally charged with it, altho boxes of what the Hunts consider convicting evidence were turned over to the Justice Department six months ago.

In the course of trying to find out what happened to all that money, Tom Hunt began to visit locations where the food company was supposed to have processing operations, and found no manager, nothing happening. An attempt was

then made to go to the old man, H. L. Hunt himself, with the information that it looked like he was being betrayed by some of his own, most-trusted people. The old man, it appears, refused to hear talk of it, so a detective agency was hired to look into the matter.

This agency and several subsequent ones learned that six different games were being run on H. L. H. Foods. Inspection of the crates of evidence suggests that the company was buying properties for well over the market price, with the overage being split between the seller and certain companies which were no more than blind post-office boxes.

Another scheme was to declare high percentages of the premium-quality food coming off the production line to be distressed [that is, slightly damaged but still saleable merchandise], sell it at a knock-down price to a broker, who then turned around and sold it for what it was really worth. There were also kickbacks, phony brokerage houses, and such goodies as \$185,000 spent on a 100-year-old pecan processing plant containing machinery fused by rust.

EVEN IN this era of huge embezzlements and thefts, it appeared that the money lost by old man Hunt was impressively large. In the other celebrated cases of the last couple of years, once the crime was estab-

lished there was no question about who committed it; but in the Hunts' case, there was enough lack of proof so that an agency was hired—the Hunts claim not by them—which tapped some phones to find out more.

By one of those cloddish accidents, the tappers were discovered, arrested, and eventually convicted. The tappees sued the Hunts for damages, and the Hunts countersued for damages to their food company. Both suits were settled out of court under a secret agreement in which the Hunts were paid \$100,000 by three of their ex-employees.

That is hardly compensation for what was lost. Nor has anyone explained why, if the Justice Department is slanted so far toward crusty right-wingers, they went after the Hunts, who were only going after their money. The Hunts hypothesized that it was the CIA getting back at Bunker Hunt for his refusal to let them place their agents in his since-nationalized Libyan Oil Company, where Americans could hang around and spy without looking too, too conspicuous. Maybe they're right. With a story like this, ordinary explanations hardly suffice.